

FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Steadfast

December 3, 2000
John M. Buchanan

The symbol of Christmas—what is it? It is the rainbow arched over the roof of the sky when the clouds are heavy with foreboding. It is the cry of life in the newborn babe when, forced from its mother's nest, it claims its right to live. It is the brooding Presence of the Eternal Spirit making crooked paths straight, rough places smooth, tired hearts refreshed, dead hopes stir with newness of life. It is the promise of tomorrow at the close of every day, the movement of life in defiance of death, and the assurance that love is sturdier than hate, that right is more confident than wrong, that good is more permanent than evil.

Howard Thurman
The Mood of Christmas

F O U R T H
P R E S B Y
T E R I A N
C H U R C H



A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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**STEADFAST
DECEMBER 3, 2000**

**JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 21:25-38**

“All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness.” (Psalm 25:10)

Dear God, our lives are busy, filled with seasonal activity and the pace is quickening and we're already wondering whether we will accomplish all of it. And so we come here to be together in your presence. In the midst of all the noise and activity, the high expectations we have for ourselves, quiet us, silence in us any voice but yours and startle us once again with your steadfast love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

After a six week absence, I am delighted to be back on this first Sunday of Advent.

It is a cardinal rule of homiletics that the preacher should not use matters as personal as physical health or surgery in his or her sermons. But, I cannot say how grateful I am to be back this morning because I cannot presume everyone knows I was gone, or where I went, or even noticed, for that matter. So here it is. I had hip replacement surgery six weeks ago: it was successful, recovery has gone amazingly well. It was, as you might expect, a learning experience—I learned again how blessed we are to live in this time when what used to be debilitating, painful, sometimes a fatal condition, is remedied routinely by doctors and nurses and modern hospitals. I learned again how blessed we are to live in a world that includes health care professionals, nurses, aids, cleaning people, clerks. I learned again how blessed it is to be surrounded by caring, loving people and so I am deeply grateful – grateful to be back – grateful for my colleagues who have led and preached so faithfully and eloquently, grateful for a sense of God's providence and love which comes, by the way, not abstractly, out of the blue, but as people tell you they are praying for you, which so many of you did in notes and get well cards, some serious – some irreverent – some not even appropriate for a sermon illustration. Through it all—and all of them—came your love and within your love, the love of God for all of us, particularly when we are in need.

Among the very best of those cards was a packet, hand delivered to me on my first day home from the hospital by Donna Gray. It contained cards hand made and illustrated by the children of the Fourth Presbyterian Church Church School.

Anthony and Thomas, Second grade, pretty much stuck to the script.

“Dr. Buchanan
Get well soon.
Love, 2nd Grade, Anthony”

“Dr. Buchanan”
from Thomas in Second grade
“Get well soon”

Succinct and to the point. The only frivolity from Thomas was a small Halloween pumpkin.

Some could not restrain an artistic flare.

Willy’s card has a bright tri-colored heart and inside a wonderful rainbow.

Bowen Tretheway—brought the sun, a child and a tiny rabbit together to say “we all hope you get well” and inside wrote “Friend” and adorned it with two smiling faces, two stars flanking a star of David, a nice, interfaith touch.

Second grade Brooke decorated her card with a large dog with flirtatiously feminine eyelashes saying “Hi”—“I love you” and “I’m hungry.”

Bennett drew a peace sign and smiley face, butterflies and a Celtic cross and explained “Dr. Buchanan, you may not know me Because I am new here. I hope you get well, I herd you got hurt.”

My favorite was a team effort by the Schemper/Denny’s which addresses me:

“Dear John: get well and good luck in your recovery.
p.s.: you rock the whole house with your preachin.”

Finally, a second grader, Mariana, combined art and theology in a way that gave me a sermon text for the first Sunday in Advent.

A herald angel stands in the top left corner. The card reads,

“Get well soon, Dr. Buchanan Love, Mariana,”
And then inside—three colorful flowers, a red human figure, a Johnson and Johnson Band-Aid and Mariana’s instructions: “Remember, God sticks to you like a Band-Aid!”

It occurred to me that Mariana’s remarkable affirmation: “Remember, God sticks to you like a Band-Aid” is a pretty good paraphrase of Psalm 25:10:

“All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness.”

“Steadfast love and faithfulness” God’s steadfast love: someone said that’s what the whole Bible is about; that if you had to reduce the message of the Bible to a simple phrase this would be it—“God’s steadfast love.”

It’s in the Bible a lot—180 times the phrase is used: three times in our Psalter reading this morning: 26 times in Psalm 136—“O give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever.”

There is a wonderful Hebrew word for it: *chesed*—God’s steadfast love, God’s compassion, God’s uninterrupted, unconditional eternal love: The root of the word in Hebrew is a mother’s womb—God’s strong, compassionate, fiercely steadfast love.

Psalm 25 is one of a number of acrostic Psalms: each verse begins with a successive letter in the Hebrew alphabet, a literary device used, I am told, by the poet to convey a sense of comprehensiveness, completeness. All the letters of the alphabet are here; everything that needs to be said is said here. And directly in the center of the acrostic, the pivot point is verse 10:

“All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.”

The writer knows that this is the most radical, most startling thing anybody has ever said about God. God’s primary characteristic, God’s essence, is steadfast love. People didn’t talk or think about God like that. The gods of ancient religions are stern, angry, powerful, fearsome, sometimes detached, and it never occurred to anyone to use words like “chesed” to describe deity.

It’s still counter intuitive, in fact.

Henry Louis Gates, chairman of the Afro-American Studies Department and Professor of English at Harvard, describes his early experience with faith in God in a book, *Colored People*. He remembers sitting in church as a little boy with his family and trying to imagine what heaven was like.

**“Sitting up in Heaven with Miss Sarah and Reverend Monroe for that many years . . was about as appealing as getting a typhoid shot in your behind every day . . . I suppose the shakeup of my spiritual creed was hastened by my realization that I was religious in part because I was scared, scared of Jesus coming back to earth and sending me to hell, scared of being liquidated or vaporized in a nuclear holocaust.”
(*Listening for God*, Vol. 2, p. 54-55)**

Theologian and popular writer, Philip Yancey remembers: “I grew up with the image of a mathematical God who weighed my good and bad deeds on a set of scales and always found

me wanting. Somehow I missed the God of the gospels, a God of mercy and generosity. . . ”
(*What’s So Amazing About Grace?*” p.70)

And so it has been for many of us who were taught or who intuited that God is to be feared, that we never measure up to God’s expectations, that God, in Anne Lamott’s wonderful image, is like your high school principal going through your files and not liking what he finds there.

It’s where many people are – all their lives, with a remote notion of God as judge, with a load of guilt left over from childhood and a life pattern of declining interest in the whole unpleasant business.

How sad. How sad to miss the whole point. How tragic never to hear the good news. And how blessed to finally hear, to be converted a second time, to fall in love this time around with a God whose essence is steadfast love.

It is our deepest need to know that we are loved and cared for unconditionally, steadfastly. It’s there from the beginning; from our infancy we need to know the presence and touch and unconditional love of someone – a parent, a nurse, a caregiver. Psychologists know that as soon as we are capable of experiencing anxiety – this is what we are anxious about.

In the recent edition of *Presbyterians Today*, Eva Stimson writes about our church’s observance of the year of the child—and calls attention to a tragic but not uncommon phenomenon, child abandonment—often in very public places where there is some assurance that the child will be found and taken in by the authorities. Eighteen children were abandoned by their parents at the Kentucky State Fair this year. Eva writes:

“The day may have begun with anticipation, piling into the family car, looking forward to sounds and smells and excitement. Then in the middle of eating a hot dog or watching the skyward drift of an escaped balloon, a child suddenly realizes the sun has set and she is surrounded by unfamiliar faces.” (*Presbyterians Today*, December 2000)

It can take a lifetime to recover from that.

To be known and loved steadfastly is a need that is with us always even though we may spend a lifetime denying it, building defenses, or tragically, doing everything we can to compensate for its absence.

Ernest Hemmingway, who knew a lot about parental rejection and the absence of steadfast love, told a story about a Spanish father who decided to reconcile with his son who had run away to Madrid and had not been heard from in years. The father took an ad in a Madrid newspaper: “Paco: meet me at Hotel Montana Noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa”

Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father arrived at the square in front of the hotel at the appointed time he found eight hundred young men named Paco waiting for their fathers.” (See Yancy, p. 37-38)

The news is good. God’s love is steadfast. God is faithful. It is there in the Old Testament as well as the gospels—God’s love is unconditional—eternal—steadfast forever.

How far does it go? How steadfast is God’s steadfast love? Ronald Goetz, Professor of Religion at Elmhurst College was asked recently to preach at the Memorial Service of a friend by the man’s adult sons. The man was an avowed atheist. How could he do it? What right did he have to do it? He noted the irony of the son’s clinging to a faith their father had rejected. Goetz also noted the pain and abuse his friend had suffered and the connection to his atheism. In his sermon Professor Goetz said: “I would hope that grace, which God intends for the salvation of all humanity, is not so fragile that it cannot stand up to human disbelief . . . Surely the God who dwelt among us in the person of Jesus Christ is both too powerful and too gracious to take our rebellious rejections for final answers.” [The Christian Century, October 18, 2000, p. 1028]

In the city of Florence there is a wonderful building, the Foundling Hospital, built in 1419 to be a haven for abandoned infants. Down across the centuries, even in our era, some parents, for a variety of reasons, decide to abandon their children. The practice was common in Florence in the Middle Ages apparently. Students of architecture come to see the Foundling Hospital because the arcade was designed by Filippo Brunelleschi, and became the defining model for Renaissance architecture. The building currently houses pediatric clinics, children’s and family services and a wonderful museum.

What caught my attention in the guidebooks was the Rota, a large lazy Susan like device beside the entry. A mother who could no longer care for her baby, instead of depositing it on a street corner, walking away and hoping for the best, brought the infant to the Foundling Hospital, placed the baby on the Rota, and rang a small bell. From inside a nurse opened a small door, turned the wheel that rotated the Rota and the baby disappeared through the opening into the Foundling hospital. As I stood looking at it I thought about that moment.

And then inside, in the museum, in the middle of a remarkable little art collection, we stumbled upon a glass display case. Inside were some of the blankets in which the infants were wrapped when they were placed on the Rota. On the top shelf were samples of ribbons and buttons and medals parents affixed to the blankets of their babies as they passed into the hospital, often keeping a piece of the same ribbon or a button for future identification. There were tiny medals—which had been cut in half; one half pinned to the blanket—one half kept by the mother for the day when her fortunes would have improved and she could reclaim her child.

As I have recalled standing there looking at those tiny ribbons, buttons, medals, some of them almost 600 years old, I have concluded that they are symbols of steadfast love—and

also symbols of the mysterious reality of God's steadfast love—symbols not unlike little Mariana's band-aid.

Every time we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism we remember and affirm that mystery --"Byrn Claire—Lily Charlotte—you are a child of God—you belong to Jesus Christ forever."

And we reach into our own past to reclaim that magnificent mystery. "Holy God, remind us of the promises given in our own baptism . . ."

How do we dare make that claim? How do we presume that God knows we are here, cares about us, loves us unconditionally?

We do so because it is Advent and there is an event ahead of us now that invites, indeed compels, our trust. It is more than a symbol. This is the steadfast and faithful God expressing unconditional love for all of us – a child, a promised savior, God's steadfast love and faithfulness incarnate, in a Bethlehem birth. Jesus Christ is his name. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer
December 3, 2000
The Reverend Dana Ferguson

Gracious God from whom we receive the gift of life, in whom we learn the meaning of life and to whom we owe the glory of life, we praise your holy name. You cause the heavens to be glad and the earth to rejoice, because you come as no other comes: you come as steadfast love and faithfulness.

Greet us this day with your grace, we pray, for we are in need of you. Though our schedules may grow frantic with activities, with planning, with celebrating, our efforts do not yield peace, peace as you give. Today we would be quiet enough to hear your voice. Today we would be still enough to feel your touch. Help us to find that place where we can receive as well as give, wait as well as act; listen as well as speak. As we listen, gracious one, open us to the possibility that you are waiting for us; waiting for us to repent and change; waiting for us to listen and respond with a burning passion to your truth, and your justice, and your mercy.

As we enter into this season we remember those for whom the holidays are not so joyous. Help us be aware of those who are struck by painful memories, stung by loneliness, and who long to be comforted. Just as your Son brought your peace, bring your peace to them through us. Use us, loving God, to embody your care. Where there is despair, kindle hope. Where there is oppression, bring justice. Where there is pessimism, awaken faith. Where there is violence, wage peace.

As we depart for Bethlehem, O God, prepare us for a holy surprise. If you arrive at some other hour than 8/11 or some other day than Sunday, let us harken to the song of your annunciation. And, if you appear not in our sanctuary but in a shelter for the homeless, let us hasten to the site of your visitation.

As we go forth to do your work, O God, open our eyes that we might see you at work in our world. For we pray this and all things in the name of the one to come praying together as he taught saying, Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.